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Navigating the intergenerational divide? Youth, artisanal diamond mining, and social transformation in Sierra Leone

Roy Maconachie

Department of Social and Policy Sciences

University of Bath, Bath, BA2 7AY

r.maconachie@bath.ac.uk

1. Introduction

In Sierra Leone, artisanal and small-scale mining and the attendant seasonal migration of labour to resource-rich areas, have long played an important role in shaping the livelihood portfolios of the rural poor. Artisanal mining activities – informal, labour-intensive, low-tech mineral extraction and processing – have been particularly vital to Sierra Leone’s burgeoning youth population in the context of an employment-constrained economy, although patron-client relationships have had a long history of mediating access to resources in rural stretches of the country. The patrimonial networks associated with diamond mining in particular have played an instrumental role in shaping patterns of rural politics and identity – especially those that concern intergenerational relationships between youth and the so-called ‘gerontocracy’. Indeed, there is now a well-established literature that focuses on the role that diamond-fuelled patrimonial networks assumed in the creation of a socially-excluded rural underclass during the pre-war years, and how this fomented the preconditions for the country’s protracted civil war during the 1990s (Richards, 2005; 1998; Richards *et al.*, 2004; Peters, 2011; 2006; Keen, 2005; Reno, 2003, Wilson, 2013; Zulu and Wilson, 2012). Related to this hypothesis, one common explanation for the underlying cause of the war argues that the conflict developed from an intra-elite struggle to control markets in

diamonds and other extractive resources, which was subsequently taken over by armed factions composed primarily of angry, frustrated youth, when the state collapsed (Reno, 1998; 2003).

While the country's brutal civil war serves as a stark reminder of what can happen when young people's social mobility is blocked, many youth today continue to find themselves in challenging situations where they are unable to meet their social or economic obligations, set up an independent household or transition into a state of 'adulthood'. As Borersch-Supan (2013:27) remarks with reference to the post-conflict period:

When resource scarcity is compounded by rapid demographic expansion, patrimonial networks tighten and non-insiders are excluded with few alternative routes to advancement... Thus those in control become a smaller, ever older group, while those waiting to gain status grow in number as well as with respect to age.

Indeed, while much has been written about the links between diamonds, youth and conflict in Sierra Leone, comparatively less academic attention has focused on how artisanal mining operations – of both diamonds, and increasingly gold – have shaped, and are having to adapt to, wider change in rural society in the contemporary post-conflict period. Since the formal declaration of peace in 2002, Sierra Leone has successfully completed a demobilization and disarmament and reintegration (DDR) programme and, with extensive donor support, has made significant progress in rehabilitating state security and governance and rebuilding infrastructure. And while there has been much fanfare from the government in its effort to stimulate large-scale extractive industry investment from foreign companies, little focus has been directed towards regulating and formalizing the artisanal mining sector, in spite of the far reaching transformational effects it has had on rural economy and society over the

years. Although artisanal mining is the second largest employment generator after agriculture, creating income earning opportunities for some 200,000 to 300,000 people, concerns abound that the country's burgeoning unemployed youth population remains a potential source of further conflict. With 40.9 per cent of Sierra Leone's population below the age of 15 years and 36.4 per cent between the ages of 15 and 35 the problem remains urgent (GoSL, 2015). The catastrophic consequences of the recent Ebola crisis further ruptured the rural economy, resulting in widespread redundancies and unemployment, as foreign mining companies went into administration and the informal economy, including the artisanal mining sector, all but came to a standstill.

Moving on from debates over Sierra Leone's so-called 'crisis of youth' (e.g. see Peters, 2011), it remains pertinent to the overall issue of poverty entrenchment to explore the significance of artisanal mining and its associated labour mobility, in shaping the livelihood trajectories of rural young people, and mediating power relationships that define access to resources. Elsewhere, research carried out by Fithen and Richards (2005) and Peters (2007) on Makeni's motorbike taxi riders association (BRA) has noted the importance of mobility in advancing non-agrarian livelihood independence, particularly when young people are able to physically circumvent the influence of elders who control land and resources. Likewise, other research (see Fanthorpe and Maconachie, 2010; Boersch-Supan, 2012) has examined the role that membership in youth organisations can play in fostering autonomy from elders and increasing social mobility for young people. This paper focuses on the way in which social relations between generations are contested and negotiated with specific reference to artisanal mining, exploring the long history of possibilities that the sector has offered to young people as a route out of agrarian poverty.

Of key significance in Sierra Leone, artisanal mining is not only a source of income for young people, but it is a livelihood activity that is defined by mobility, as it also interlocks closely with a host of other downstream and ancillary activities that drive the rural economy (Maconachie, 2011). This micro-economy is dependent upon seasonal migratory labour streams: individuals ‘straddle’ different productive activities throughout the year, moving freely between different geographic locations. Rural youth often combine farming and mining activities, with the former being undertaken predominantly in the dry season when river levels are low, and the latter being carried out mainly during the rainy season. The income generated from artisanal mining is then frequently reinvested into farming, or to finance the expansion of cash crops, such as coffee, cocoa and kola nuts (Maconachie and Binns, 2007).

The analysis in this paper thus builds upon and updates earlier work published on the mobility patterns that define farming–mining linkages in Sierra Leone (Maconachie *et al.*, 2006; Maconachie and Binns, 2007), and contributes to evolving debates concerning the relationship between mining, agrarian change and social transformation in sub-Saharan Africa that have been rehearsed extensively in recent years (Maconachie and Hilson, 2016; Kotsadam and Tolonen, 2016; Bryceson and Jonsson, 2010; Hilson and Ackah-Baidoo, 2011; Hilson, 2009). As noted by Porter *et al.* (2010), for young people, physical mobility is often closely bound up with social mobility, which has important associated impacts in terms of intergenerational tensions and negotiation.

In providing a longitudinal focus on labour migration, youth livelihoods and the changing nature of patronage relationships in the artisanal mining sector, the paper

proceeds as follows. Following this introduction, section two briefly sketches out a broad historical overview of the role that artisanal mining has assumed in rural society in Sierra Leone's Eastern Province, spanning the period between the colonial era and the country's civil war of the 1990s, and highlighting the importance of youth migration streams and the support networks that sustain mining labour. In doing so, the discussion explores the dynamics of patron-client relationships, while offering insight into some of the early political responses to youth mobility associated with mining migration. This sets the stage for section three, which draws upon primary data gathered in Kono District over an extended period between 2003-2016, and explores the role of artisanal mining in shaping intergenerational relations in the context of a changing, post-war rural landscape. The final section of the paper examines the current state of Sierra Leone's artisanal mining sector, providing some reflection on the impacts of the recent Ebola outbreak on labour mobility and patronage networks, where, in the aftermath of the crisis, there continues to be far-reaching socio-economic consequences. The paper concludes by drawing out a number of lessons that concern youth mobility and artisanal mining, as the government of Sierra Leone discusses possibilities for formalizing the sector and updating core minerals policy.

2. Artisanal mining, labour mobility and patronage in historical context

Alluvial diamonds were first discovered in the Gbobora stream in Kono District in the Eastern Province in 1930, and further geological exploration subsequently revealed the main deposit in the central plains of Kono District. When mining operations first began in 1932, the colonial government's strategy to capture the revenue generating potential of diamond mining was to grant an exclusive license to explore, mine and market diamonds to the Sierra Leone Selection Trust (SLST), a wholly owned subsidiary of Consolidated African Selection Trust (Saylor, 1967). In 1953, a second major deposit

was discovered in Lower Bambara Chiefdom in Kenema District. Here, diamonds found in the basin of the Male River were traced via the Moa River to the Tongo River (Binns, 1982a).

Since the diamond deposits were dispersed over an area exceeding 20,000 square kilometres, and therefore impossible to monitor, they soon attracted widespread immigration from youth all over West Africa, who arrived with rudimentary hand tools to undertake artisanal extraction. The informal nature of mining, with its low barriers to entry, immediately served as a magnet for young people seeking to make their fortunes. However, the influx of young migrant ‘strangers’¹ to Kono District led many ethnic Kono to argue that they were not getting a fair share of the wealth generated from their land. Measures to check immigration into Kono District were taken in 1954 and directed initially towards the Lebanese, who had long dominated the trade and export of Sierra Leonean diamonds since their discovery. But then a bill was passed in May 1955 to restrict the entry of black African migrants to mining areas, notably Mandingos from Guinea. On a visit to Kono District in October 1956, the colonial governor issued an ultimatum to foreigners to leave Sierra Leone within three weeks (Binns, 1982a). The expulsion order was reported as being successful beyond expectation, mainly due to the cooperation of neighbouring French authorities. When all police reports were finally compared, it was estimated that 45,000 African foreigners left Sierra Leone within three weeks of the ultimatum (GoSL, 1956b). However, 75,000 people,

¹ As Van der Laan (1965) explains, when measures were put in place to deter illicit diamond mining activities in 1954, the authorities overhauled the definition of a ‘stranger’ in the Diamond Industry Protection Ordinance. Whereas previously, every non-Kono was considered to be a ‘stranger’, the new definition applied only to those non-Konos who had arrived in Kono district after January 1st 1950. This included foreign nationals from outside the country, as well as other non-Kono ethnic groups from within Sierra Leone.

predominantly youth, were still engaged in diamond mining in the mid-1950s, most of them operating illegally (Gberie, 2005).

The first wave of youth migration to mining areas revived long-standing British concerns over the durability of colonial ‘indirect rule’ in Sierra Leone. At the time, British colonial administration was confined to Freetown and its environs, and in an attempt to keep administrative costs to a minimum, a system of ‘indirect rule’ in the rural Provinces left local administration in the control of African chiefs. This arrangement created a constant source of administrative tension, but it also provided an environment for patron-client relationships within the booming diamond economy to flourish. Chiefs’ jurisdictions were protected by laws prohibiting the sale of Protectorate land to ‘non-natives’ and stringent concessions laws, which served as a deterrent to speculators and genuine investors alike (Fyfe, 1962:612-14). At the same time, there was a legislative strengthening of chiefs’ coercive powers, including official recognition of ‘native’ forced labour. This solution gave rise to further unease, not least because it also saw an administrative blind eye being turned to domestic slavery (Grace, 1975).² But when industrial and artisanal mining began to attract migrant youth in the 1930s, sympathy for the oppressed began to be elided by concerns for public order. One administrative report from this period notes that: ‘increasing ease of travel and the attraction of mines means the influx of strangers into chiefdoms, strangers who know what is done elsewhere, who criticise a weak native government, or one which tends to be reactionary or oppressive’ (GoSL, 1935:26-8). These fears redoubled during the

² Domestic slavery was abolished in 1928 and legal recognition of forced labour for the benefit of chiefs was conditionally withdrawn in 1938 and fully withdrawn in 1956.

artisanal diamond rush of the 1950s, with concerns for unruly youth in Kono featuring prominently in colonial reports. According to one report:

...the atmosphere prevalent in the diamond mining areas, which was spread by miners retuning from them with money to spend and dissolute habits, could not be other than inimical to the traditional restraints of tribal discipline and good order, and some apprehension was felt on this account (GoSL, 1956a:4).

However, Kono District did not become the hotbed of de-tribalization and youth militancy that the outgoing colonial administration had feared. Violent clashes between artisanal miners and security forces sent to suppress illicit mining persuaded the colonial government to renegotiate the SLST lease and legalize artisanal mining. The Alluvial Diamond Mining Scheme (ADMS) was introduced in 1956. The scheme placed chiefs at the forefront of artisanal license administration; just as colonial land law had placed them at the forefront of rural land management. This arrangement – which has been maintained to this day – helped to entrench a system in which private investors (‘supporters’) negotiated access to mining plots with chiefs and then hired gangs of youths (‘tributors’) to work them. ‘Supporters’ would supply food and tools to these gangs, but they would receive no monetary payments unless diamonds were found (Minikin, 1971; Zack-Williams, 1995).

Coinciding with the first ‘diamond rush’ to Kono District shortly after the Second World War, fears escalated amongst colonial officials that the bonds of traditional communities were under threat. But at the same time, mining revenues were being used by the government to finance infrastructure development, including road construction, the provision of clean drinking water and electricity (Temple, 2006). Mining also attracted ‘downstream’ industries and the development of periodic food and consumer goods markets around mining settlements. These developments strengthened economic

links between diamondiferous areas and regional cities and towns, offering opportunities for youth as farmers, miners and an itinerant class of traders (Binns, 1982b). Consequently, the leading settlements in diamondiferous areas – notably in Koidu in Kono District and Tongo Field in Kenema District – became important centres of economic growth.

The development dividend was nevertheless constrained by the ease with which alluvial diamonds could be extracted, transported and smuggled across borders. Government estimates suggest that in the early 1960s, diamond revenues produced under the ADMS were only one-thirtieth of their world market value (Van der Laan, 1965:27). Furthermore, while diamondiferous areas continued to see large influxes of non-Kono youth, these migrations did not generate class-based solidarities as much as provide opportunities for local chiefs and politicians to champion the historical and cultural rights of the Kono people (Hayward, 1968; Reno, 1995). Young mining migrants found a means to make a living, but they were also drawn into exploitative relationships with chiefs, ‘supporters’ and purchasing middlemen. For example, Reno (2003:49) notes that chiefs were able to extract informal ‘license fees’ and ‘fines’ from illicit miners in return for ‘protection’. Such relationships helped to ensure that mining governance remained informal, especially as mining activities often took place in remote areas outside the *de facto* orbit of the state agencies (Fisher, 2007).

By the late 1960s and early 1970s, seasonal and circular migration to Kono’s diamond-rich alluvial deposits served an important element in the livelihood portfolios of many youth. But at the same time, a commonly held view was that artisanal diamond mining was having detrimental effects on Sierra Leone’s rural economy, in drawing productive young males away from farming, affecting the achievement of self-sufficiency in basic

foodstuffs, and in destroying large areas of good farmland in the frantic search for diamonds (Binns, 1982a). Migration from both within Sierra Leone and also across the porous Guinea and Liberia borders had the much-reported effects of reducing domestic food production in the 1960s and 1970s, with the loss of farm labour, and also generated serious security problems in burgeoning towns such as Koidu.

But above all, alluvial diamond mining lent itself extraordinarily well to patronage politics. In the 1960s, extraction methods became more mechanized, involving draglines, earth-moving equipment and sophisticated treatment plants to separate diamonds from the gravels. The APC government under Siaka Stevens centralized control over the allocation of artisanal mining licenses in 1967 and in 1970 acquired a controlling interest in SLST to create the National Diamond Mining Company (NDMC). These moves facilitated direct government control over mining rights in prime concession areas. Dealers lacking strong local roots, especially Lebanese, were now given preferential access to diamond mining and export licenses. Mining licenses were also issued to regime supporters under the guise of the Cooperative Contract Mining Scheme, introduced in 1973 (Fithen, 1999; Reno, 1995). Between 1963 and 1975, the sale of industrial and gem diamonds represented about 60 per cent of the country's export revenue, with the total value of diamond production peaking at £19.3 million in 1975 (Binns, 1982a). But as diamond resources were appropriated by the governing elite, official diamond exports rapidly fell from 1.7 million carats in the 1960s, to a mere 50,000 carats by 1985 (Temple, 2006). By the mid-1980s, increasing scarcity of foreign currency and price controls had left basic imports of rice and fuel permanently in short supply. Infrastructure deteriorated, wages rapidly declined and government services became non-functional. As the state became 'hollowed out' by

Siaka Stevens and his cronies, the stage was set for country's 'lost decade' of civil war during the 1990s.

3. Youth mobility and a changing mining landscape in the post-war period

Following the end of the war in 2002, what might be described as a 'second diamond rush' to Kono District took place as large numbers of displaced civilians, ex-combatants and youths were drawn back to mining settlements in search of diamonds. At the time, reports from United Nations peacekeepers suggested that the population of Kono District was growing at a rate of nearly 150,000 persons annually in the early post-war period (cited in Brown, et al. 2006). Moreover, official government statistics suggested that the post-war population of Koidu had grown to 111,800 and had become the most ethnically diverse urban centre in the country (GoSL, 2006). Other studies also confirmed the continuing importance of seasonal migration in these mining regions, suggesting that some 10,000 workers were supporting between 70,000 and 140,000 people in their rural districts of origin (Amco-Robertson Mineral Services, 2002).

In the aftermath of the war, some of the worst poverty in Sierra Leone was concentrated in diamond mining towns. A 2005 Partnership Africa Canada study noted that the vast majority of artisanal miners were living below the international poverty line (PAC, 2005). This predicament was compounded by alterations to patronage relationships, as many resource-starved elites were forced to abandon patronage entirely in favour of self-enrichment (Fanthorpe and Maconachie, 2010). Young miners were noted to be particularly vulnerable, since many were migrant 'strangers' lacking the social and family networks to support them in host communities.

While a number of scholars have argued that artisanal mining may represent an opportunity for young people to escape the unequal circumstances of their agrarian communities (Peters 2007), in the aftermath of the war, many youth found themselves in equally unjust situations in mining areas. In such situations, ‘class’ solidarity amongst young miners can overlap with a politics of recognition, in which ethnic Kono rights and entitlements become a banner for collective action and protest against external actors perceived to be exploiting local resources unfairly. In this respect, the proliferation of Kono-based mining advocacy groups in the post-war period was striking, often being driven by the feeling that youth were being left behind and de-linked from the post-war development process. Much of this activism was inspired by the success of the Movement of Concerned Kono Youth (MOCKY), a group which mobilized in Freetown in 1999, and was initially concerned with protecting diamond wealth for Kono citizens through efforts to control opportunistic diamond digging and smuggling. For some youth, the success of their activism in civil society groups became a stepping stone into national politics, with Kono District being a key electoral battleground between the main political parties.³ However, how far the post-war revival of electoral democracy has benefitted Kono youth is open to question. Many Kono residents interviewed in the early post-conflict years claimed that when local

³ In an interview with former MOCKY chairman Mohammed Jabbie in Koidu in September 2008, numerous examples were given of MOCKY activists taking up political appointments. For example, Mohammed Jabbie became chairman of the Budget Oversight Committee for Kono District Council (KDC); former MOCKY secretary general Sahr Nyama took up the position of the ‘national young generation leader’ for the SLPP; Abdulai Kumasi was appointed as SLPP chairman for the Eastern young generation; Tamba B. Gbenda became secretary to the Budget Oversight Committee for KDC; Tamba A. P. Fomba was appointed SLPP Councillor for KDC; Komba S. Bockarie took up the position of APC Councillor for KDC; Aiah Y. Aruna became APC Councillor for Koidu-New Sembehun Town Council (KNSTC); Sahr E. Yambasu was appointed Deputy Chief Administrator for KNSTC; and Abu D. S. Bockarie became attached to the Office of the Vice-President.

activists moved into politics, they tended to ‘sell out’ and that all of their initial principles and ideals became corrupted.

However, during the wave of migration to Kono District following the end of the civil war, diamonds and temporary labour migration to diamondiferous areas continued to play an important part of livelihood portfolios for many youth, often giving them an increased degree of freedom from the rural gerontocracy. Research carried out in the settlement of Kayima, a village situated in Sandor Chiefdom, 40 kilometres to the north-west of the diamond-mining centre Koidu, is instructive in exploring how changing circumstances around alluvial mining activities can alter both livelihood and mobility patterns. In 2004, and then again in 2008, 50 households in Kayima were interviewed, and a number of key questions concerning the interactions between mining activities and the rural economy were explored. Particular attention was directed to the seasonal or temporary movement patterns of individuals between their farms and the nearby mining regions of Yengema and Tongo Field. Here, in the context of farming-mining linkages, the importance of youth mobility became very clear, where young people ‘straddled’ different productive activities throughout the year, moving back and forth between different geographic locations.

The literature on livelihood diversification identifies a wide range of factors that help to explain why diversification occurs and how patterns of diversification are shaped (e.g. see Bryceson 1996; Ellis 1998, 2006). One such factor, seasonality, remains an important determinant in understanding the circular migration patterns that define the ‘interlocking nature’ of mining and farming. In Kono District, it is important to note that the diamond mining and rice farming activities ‘dovetail’ one another, with the

former being undertaken predominantly in the dry season when river levels are low and the latter being carried out mainly during the rainy season. Whilst diamond mining is almost entirely undertaken by men, traditional farming activities associated with upland rice farming, the dominant food production system in the Eastern Province, are divided between men and women according to different tasks undertaken at various points in the cultivation cycle. Although farm preparation may be extremely labour intensive at peak times of the year, there are some periods when male youth can afford to spend some time away from their farms and may undertake diamond mining. In farming communities located close to the main diamond mining areas in Kono, such as Kayima, there has long been a regular circulation of youth labour between farming and mining activities over the course of the year. This kind of diversification within livelihood portfolios was not only important in helping young people to rebuild their lives in the immediate aftermath of the war, but arguably, the mobility associated with this ‘dual economy’ meant that male youth were not necessarily chained to their rural villages, thereby providing an opportunity to break free from Chiefly authority and the yoke of custom.

More recent fieldwork carried out in Kono District in July 2011 and January 2013, further illuminates the considerable changes that the artisanal mining sector has been subjected to in recent years. Over these periods, a total of 120 interviews were carried out with mining youth in the Kono settlements of Bandifayie, Bumpeh and Koidu, and there was a common perception among respondents that most productive alluvial gravels had become overworked and mined-out over the years, resulting in far fewer dividends in artisanal diamond mining. Many young miners interviewed claimed that they had spent years working as diamond diggers had, in fact, seen very little in the way of any remuneration, and were consequently ‘branching out’ into other activities. As

such, although historically, informal small-scale mining and the seasonal migration of labour to Kono have been vital to local livelihood portfolios, in many parts of the District the artisanal mining sector is under considerable stress. In recent interviews with small-scale diggers in and around the diamond mining centre of Koidu, artisanal operators repeatedly exclaimed, ‘diamonds don loss’ (there are no diamonds now).

As Kono’s alluvial gravels have increasingly become worked out, the most productive mining activity in the District today has become mechanized and capital-intensive (NACE, 2006). Increasingly, local artisanal licence holders forge relationships with wealthy Sierra Leoneans and non-nationals who can afford to hire excavators to dig below the alluvial deposits and recover diamonds far below the sub-soil. At the same time, these wealthy investors often hide behind local operators to avoid paying taxes and other regulatory fees. As the need for unskilled labour has declined, what has emerged is a daily wage economy, referred to in Kono as ‘Kosoboh’, in which the artisanal miner is paid a fixed sum for a day of labour, and is excluded from any complex sharing arrangement as was previously the case. For many poor individuals, declining demand for unskilled labour has meant that small-scale mining may no longer serve as a means of escape, real or imagined, from agrarian poverty. This strain on livelihoods has been compounded by the macro-economic impacts of the Ebola crisis, which came into sharp focus when the country’s two largest iron ore producers, London Mining and African Minerals, went into administration, resulting in the loss of some 7,500 jobs in the formal sector. While both companies were hard hit by a 40 per cent drop in the global price of iron ore, it seems that the disruption caused by the Ebola epidemic served as the final nail in the coffin. The role that artisanal mining assumes in the rural economy has therefore once again returned to the fore, as the demand for

rural job opportunities for young people has intensified in an employment-constrained economy.

4. Youth and artisanal mining in the Contemporary period- 2016

In the final section of the paper, the analysis focuses on present-day circumstances in Kono District, and provides some reflection on the current state of the artisanal mining sector. Drawing upon research carried out during two fieldwork periods in 2016, the discussion focuses primarily on the impacts of the recent Ebola crisis on the rural economy, and what this has meant for young artisanal miners and their relationship with rural elites. Pilot research was first undertaken during the month of July 2016, and an attempt was made to determine how key actors in the artisanal diamond mining sector had been impacted by Ebola. In order to capture a broad range of perspectives, fieldwork was confined to Kono District and Kenema District. Multi-sited research took place in a series of diamond mining communities where strong rapport had already been established with a diverse range of stakeholders. Qualitative data were generated using a suite of methods derived from the Rapid Rural Appraisal family, including transect walks, semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and life histories with miners. In total, 30 key informant interviews were carried with a wide range of actors, including: diggers, supporters, traders and middlemen, Chiefs, elders, and a number of government officials involved in policy formulation.

Although in Sierra Leone, estimates of the macro-economic damage caused by the Ebola crisis have been tallied in the range of \$1.4 billion, the research revealed that the disease has also had far reaching knock-on effects at the micro-level, suppressing informal livelihood opportunities for young people. This is particularly the case for those who are dependent on artisanal and small-scale mining, and in the context of this

paper, there are three main impacts that have had a significant bearing on livelihood portfolios, patterns of mobility and relationships with patrons.

First, and perhaps the most obvious factor, is that during the crisis, many parts of Sierra Leone were placed in effective quarantine with regional trade routes blocked off, and this curtailed mobility and created enormous logistical challenges for all those dependent on artisanal mining. This had catastrophic consequences for youth, suppressing seasonal migratory labour streams to mining areas, and disrupting the downstream and ancillary activities that are associated with the artisanal mining sector. As explained in a recent interview with one diamond miner from Bumpeh, mobility was severely restricted during the crisis:

During Ebola, we couldn't work effectively. Sometimes you would be mining at your work site and then you would hear about quarantine in your area. So you would start wondering if it was your own family that had been quarantined and you would have to abandon the work and rush back to town. So the work was not effective. Eventually the government stopped groups of miners from assembling in the pits altogether. [Interview, July 2016]

During the crisis, internal travel within the country was also severely curtailed, with estimates suggesting that by May 2014, there had been a drop in fuel sales of about 27 per cent (UNECA, 2014). However, it should be noted that restrictions on movement not only affected the livelihoods of young miners at the bottom of the chain, but also buyers, dealers and the extensive network of actors who support diamond transactions in Sierra Leone and internationally. Many buyers travel to Kono from as far as Guinea to purchase diamonds, and cross-border mobility restrictions disrupted intra-country trade and had significant impacts on sourcing patterns. Moreover, evidence suggests that at the height of the crisis, buyers in Surat, India, where an estimated 80 per cent of the world's diamonds are cut and polished, stopped sending their traders to West Africa

(see Maconachie and Hilson, 2015). A number of reports go as far as suggesting that some even returned parcels originating from Sierra Leone, Liberia and Guinea, over fears of the disease (Thomas, 2014).

Second, and related to the first factor, the crisis also had a significant impact on local patronage networks, and the so-called ‘big men’ who support young miners. In June and July 2016, interviews and focus group discussions were held with a wide range of stakeholders, including gold and diamond miners, supporters, traders and middlemen, diamond exporters, chiefs, and government officials within the National Minerals Authority. This research revealed that the relationship a miner has with both ‘supporters’ and purchasing middlemen is strongly based on trust, which became severely strained during the Ebola crisis because of faltering production. As explained by one miner from Koidu:

The relationship between a miner and buyer is defined by a digger’s reliability and is basically promoted by diamonds. If you can sell diamonds today, they will know you. If you cannot produce diamonds tomorrow, and they are not forthcoming, it is difficult to make friends amongst the buyers. [Interview, July 2016]

In addition, not only was trust with young miners put under stress, but supporters also feared losing their investment capital during uncertain times, and consequently withheld their funds. Inflationary pressures and depreciating exchange rates mounted as the crisis spread, undermining competitiveness and reducing purchasing power for supporters (UNECA, 2014). For example, the cost of rice (to feed diggers) and petrol (to operate water pumps) – the two main inputs that supporters must purchase for mining operations to take place – skyrocketed in price during the crisis: the cost of a cup of rice rose from 1000 *leones* to 1500 *leones*, and the price of petrol increased from 22,500 *leones* per gallon to 30,000 *leones* per gallon. As explained by one diamond mining supporter from Bumpeh:

During Ebola there was a petrol crisis. Fuel was just too expensive then. But the work was not going well and the cost of rice was increasing at the same time. So there was a time when the returns were not commensurate to the cost of inputs. The prices of basic commodities were skyrocketing and the cost of everything was going up. Those who had money kept it safe. People were very sluggish about spending their money, even those individuals who we had been doing business with before. [Interview, July 2016]

Further interviews with both miners and the Chairman of the Gold and Diamond Dealers Association revealed that many of the wealthiest investors who were members of ethnic trading diasporas, such as the Lebanese, Fula and Mandingo, were able to leave Sierra Leone to concentrate on other businesses abroad. The loss of supporters and their mining capital had drastic consequences for youth. These finances are in effect the ‘glue’ that holds the production chain together at the bottom end, and without it, young tributors were unable to move in and out of mining.

Finally, a third factor emerging from the crisis that had a significant impact on the artisanal mining sector concerned the alteration of diversification strategies within livelihood portfolios. As noted earlier in the paper, livelihood diversification is not a new development in Sierra Leone, and it has long been an important aspect of livelihood strategies in rural areas. However, as explained by Pijpers (2011), diversification is also often a response to shocks and stresses, as occurred to the artisanal diamond mining sector in 2009, following the global financial crisis. A similar process occurred in the aftermath of the Ebola crisis. As artisanal diamond mining all but came to a grinding halt and the finances to support diamond mining activities dried up, further diversification within livelihood portfolios was stimulated, with new kinds of mobility taking place. For example, reports suggest that many Kono youth decided to re-engage in agriculture in the safety of their off-road village locations. Others branched out into small-scale gold and coltan mining in remote forest locations as part of a survival strategy. As one young gold miner interviewed at Bumpeh explained:

The reason why many men here started gold mining was because of Ebola. It is possible to mine gold in remote areas away from the main roads. During Ebola, when things were difficult and there was no support, some men joined in gold mining to get their daily bread. They never went home empty handed and others saw this and became envious. A good number of men have now permanently switched to gold mining. [Interview, 2016]

While it is certainly the case that young people's livelihood options were severely constrained during the crisis, the diversification that took place as part of a survival strategy demonstrates the resourcefulness and adaptability of youth. It has also long been argued that Kono youth have been overly dependent on diamond mining, and consequently, diversification into new economic activities during the crisis may be a positive development, giving youth further livelihood choices and freedom from gerontocratic dominance.

4. Conclusion

Entrenched agrarian poverty and a perennial shortage of employment opportunities for young people have meant that artisanal diamond mining has always been a magnet for migrant labour to Kono District. However, in spite of the fact that the sector has long been attracting poor migrants seeking a way out of agrarian poverty, many would argue that it has had a minimal long-term impact on poverty reduction. While the socially transformative effect of migration to mining areas has long been a leading issue in government and politics, history, post-war experience and more recently the post-Ebola landscape, suggest that mining youth in particular have struggled to realize social freedoms and wealth generating opportunities.

Although the analysis presented in this paper has demonstrated that at various points in time artisanal mining has served as an important livelihood activity and has had many positive linkages to other sectors of the rural economy, poverty-alleviating social

transformation for young people is unlikely to occur without further economic diversification and some degree of formalization of the sector. This remains a ‘chicken and egg’ problem in a political economy where mass poverty helps to insulate the governing establishment from popular accountability and there is little incentive for change. The vested interests associated with the current informality of the artisanal mining sector, mean that formalization will likely be a slow process, and one that will face resistance from elite actors who stand much to lose. But as current government discussions that concern formalization go forward, particular attention will need to be given to issues that concern mobility, as policies that trap young people in rural areas and do not accommodate their ability to straddle different economic activities, do not reflect the reality of livelihood portfolios.

Accompanying government support to the sector, improvements to marketing and transport linkages, knowledge transfer and skills training and improved microfinance for young miners are particularly important for both physical and social mobility. The legacy of post-war NGO interventions, and more recently the hardships faced in the aftermath of Ebola, have stimulated a more vibrant and politically-engaged civil society, and evidence suggests that poverty and marginalization can foster great adaptability in young people. But at the same time, for youth in the artisanal mining sector, physical mobility will continue to be crucial for both livelihood dependence and social mobility, both of which will also have important associated impacts for negotiating intergenerational tension and escaping poverty.

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